

T H E  
L O U N G E R.

[N<sup>o</sup> L.]

Saturday, Jan. 14. 1786.

“**T**RAGEDY (according to the ancient definition quoted in a former Paper) purges the passions by exciting them.” Comedy wishes to purge vices and follies by Ridicule. In a corrupt age reason is so weak as to be obliged to call in such allies to her assistance: let her beware that they do not, like the *Saxon* auxiliaries of our ancestors, usurp the government which they were called to defend.

In the earliest periods of life, ridicule is naturally employed against reason and propriety. The child who obeys its mother, who is afraid of its governess, who will not be concerned in little plots to deceive both, is laughed at by its bolder and less scrupulous companions. At every age reason and duty are grave and serious things, in which ridicule finds a contrast that renders her attack more easy, and her sallies more poignant.

The refinement of polished times, as was observed in the foregoing Number, does not allow them to find amusement in that gross ridicule which provokes the laughter of a ruder people. But from this very source their subjects of Comedy are often of a dangerous kind. They trench upon sacred ground; I mean not as to religion, but in morals; they paint those nicer shades of ridicule which are of an equivocal sort between virtue and vice, and often give the spectator leave to laugh, according to his own humour, either at the first or the latter.

In the *Ecole des Femmes*, (and I shall hardly be reckoned unfair when I make the reference to *Moliere*), most of the maxims which *Arnolph* makes *Agnes* read, are really good moral precepts, which a prudent wife would do well to follow, for her own sake as well as her husband's. There is just as much prudery and suspicion thrown into them, as to allow those who would wish to be less guarded than a good wife ought to be, to hold them in derision.

The *George Dandin* of the same author has been already criticised in this moral view by a very able writer. But he has not attended, say its defenders, to the proper moral of the piece; which is, to correct a very common piece of weakness, as well as of injustice, in old men of low birth and great wealth, who purchase alliance with decayed nobility, and are vain enough to imagine, that a wife bought from her necessities, or from the necessities of her family, is to love and respect the husband who has purchased her. But besides that this corrective is applied to the party who may be the weakest, but is certainly the least wicked of the two, such examples, conveyed

through the medium of Comedy, are always more readily applied to those whom they may mislead, than to those whom they may reform. The images which Comedy presents, and the ridicule it excites, being almost always exaggerated, their resemblance to real life is only acknowledged by those whose weaknesses they flatter, whose passions they excuse. They who use the example of the scene for an apology, can easily twist it into that form; they who wish to escape its correction, easily discover the difference between the scenic situation and theirs. The *George Dandin*, and the *Cocu Imaginaire* of real life, neither meet with *Lubins* nor *Pictures* to abuse them; but the girl who thinks herself intitled to be the *Angelique* of the piece, will find no difficulty in discovering her good man to be a *Dandin*; she who wishes her husband to be blind, will never forget the prudent advice of *Sganarelle*,

“ Quand vous verriez tout, ne croyez jamais rien.”

*Harpagon* is held up to detestation by Moliere, for the correction of the old, the avaricious, the usurer, whom the world proscribes, whom his children must hate for his criminal parsimony. Alas! misers and usurers neither read nor see Comedies; but the young and the thoughtless are taught to call prudence and œconomy, covetousness and avarice, to be dissipated and extravagant out of pure virtue.

In the *Cheats of Scapin*, the audience is always on the side of the rogue against the poor deluded and abused old man. It is so in all comic scenes of the kind, from the slaves of Terence down to the valets of Moliere and Regnard. Ask any wise and discreet mother of a family, if she would allow her children to associate with the party-coloured gentlemen below stairs; she will tell you, that it is of all things what she is at pains to avoid; because in their society her children would learn low manners, habits of cunning, of trick, and of falsehood. Yet you bring them into such company in the Comedies of the virtuous Moliere, where, if the valets are more clever and witty than those of ordinary life, they are only the more expert and agreeable rogues.—We don't bring them into such society, you say; we only exhibit it to their view. But you shew them people of equal rank with themselves mixed with that society, profiting by these rogueries, applauding the invention which gives them birth. If the Drama is to have any effect at all, its operation in this case must be unfavourable to truth and to virtue.

In Tragedy this effect does not require exhibition to give it force; on the contrary, it is perhaps in the reading that it fastens most strongly on young and susceptible minds. The softer feelings to which it addresses itself, are more accessible in solitude and silence than in society. It is otherwise with Comedy, ridicule operating  
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more powerfully in company and in a crowd. There is besides no hero of a player equal to the hero of a Tragedy; but the handsome figure, the shewy garb, the assured countenance, the unimbarressed address, the easy negligence, of many a Comedian, is fully equal to the character he is to represent. The fine gentleman of real life is a sort of comic actor. When we consider how much imitation, how much art, how much affectation go to make up his part, we shall not wonder, if even those who have often seen such exhibitions, should sometimes mistake the player who personates for the character personated; but the young and the unexperienced naturally transfer the brilliancy of the character to his mimic representative. This gives to such performers an advantage, of which it is to the credit of the profession that so few have availed themselves: that the profession has not all the credit it deserves, is a piece of injustice to which, perhaps, our young ladies are more indebted than we are sometimes aware of.

In the observations I formerly made on the moral effects of Tragedy, I took notice of the consequences resulting from the almost uniform introduction of love, as the ruling motive of tragic action. To this objection Comedy is equally liable; but there is an additional circumstance in which it is still more objectionable than the other department of the Drama. As love is the principal action, marriage is the constant end of Comedy. But the marriage of Comedy is generally of that sort which holds forth the worst example to the young; not an union the result of tried attachment, of sober preference, sanctified by virtue and by prudence. These are the matches which Comedy ridicules. Her marriages are the frolics of the moment, made on the acquaintance of a day, or of some casual encounter. In many Comedies, amidst the difficulties of accomplishing the marriage on which the intrigue of the piece turns, and in the course of which its incidents are displayed, the restraints of parents and guardians are introduced only to be despised and outwitted; age, wisdom, experience, every thing which a well educated young person should respect and venerate, is made a jest of; pertness, impudence, falsehood and dishonesty triumph and laugh; the audience triumph and laugh along with them; and it is not till within a few sentences of the conclusion, that the voice of morality is uttered, not heard. The interest of the play is then over, the company is arranging its departure; and if any one listens, 'tis but to observe how dull and common-place these reflections are. Virtue is thus doubly degraded; both when it speaks and when it is silent.

The purity of the British Comedy in modern times has been often contrasted with the Drama of our forefathers in those days of licentiousness and immorality when Wycherley and Congreve wrote for the rakes and libertines of a profligate court. I forbear to cite, in  
contradiction



contradiction to this, the ribaldry with which for some time past our stage has been infested, in the form of *Comic Operas* and *Burlettas*, by which the laugh and the applause of *Sadler's Wells* and *Bartholomew Fair* have been drawn from the audiences of Covent Garden and Drury Lane. But I must observe, that in this comparative estimate no account has been taken of a kind of licentiousness in which some of our latest Comedies have indulged, still more dangerous than the indelicacy of the last century: those sometimes violated decency, but these attack principle; those might put modesty to the blush, or contaminate the purity of innocence; but these shake the very foundations of morality, and would harden the mind against the sense of virtue.

It is somewhat remarkable that the French stage, formerly so proud of its *bienfiance*, should have, nearly at the same period with that of England, assumed the like pernicious licentiousness. *Figaro*, though a less witty, is as immoral a play as the *School for Scandal*.

Dramas of this pernicious sort arose upon the fashionable ridicule against what was called *Sentimental Comedy*, which it had become customary to decry, as subverting the very intention of that department of the Stage, and usurping a name, from which the gravity of its precepts and the seriousness of its incidents should have excluded it. This judgement, however, seems to be founded neither on the critical definition of Comedy, nor on the practice of its writers in those periods when it had attained its highest reputation. *Menander* and *Terence* wrote Comedies of Sentiment; nor does it seem easy to represent even follies naturally, without sometimes bringing before us the serious evils which they may produce, and the reflections which arise on their consequences. Morality may no doubt be trite, and sentiment dull, in the hands of authors of little genius; but profligacy and libertinism will as often be silly as wicked, though, in the impudence with which they unfold themselves, there is frequently an air of smartness which passes for wit, and of assurance which looks like vivacity. The counterfeits, however, are not always detected at that time of life which is less afraid of being thought dissipated than dull, and by that rank which holds regularity and sobriety among the plebeian virtues. The people indeed are always true to virtue, and open to the impressions of virtuous sentiment. With the people, the Comedies in which these are developed still remain favourites; and Corruption must have stretched its empire far indeed when the applauses shall cease with which they are received.

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